



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

Human Services Committee, February 26, 2015
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H.B. 6846, AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE GOVERNOR'S BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAMS. Position: oppose freezing TFA COLA and closing doors to HUSKY applications.

I am an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid and have represented many clients who receive or are seeking Temporary Family Assistance (TFA) from DSS. I am also counsel in Briggs v. Bremby, a case that seeks timely processing of applications for food stamps (or "SNAP") benefits. The Federal District Court granted a preliminary injunction in Briggs, finding that DSS was not complying with federal processing timeframes. That order is now on appeal to the Second Circuit.

Once again the Governor's proposed budget seeks huge cuts in Social Service programs. There are an array of cuts proposed here that will cause real pain. I am addressing just a couple. But please do not forget that these cuts come against the backdrop of a highly dysfunctional Department of Social Services that effectively bars access to benefits for many needy people. People who need to apply for and maintain their food stamps, cash or medical coverage at times simply can't because waits are prohibitively long. The most recent DSS Dashboard says the average wait time for January was one hour and 64% of the 90,947 calls that were transferred to speak to a worker abandoned the call before reaching a worker. I testified about this dysfunction before this committee on January 29th, as did many others. It seemed we were preaching to the choir, that everyone on this committee had heard from constituents about these problems, some even saying it was the primary issue they heard about.

Despite this extremely poor performance the Governor proposes to close a DSS office and reduce staffing. DSS needs the resources to address the present dysfunction, including sufficient staffing so that the public is able to reach DSS workers to apply for and maintain these basic, life sustaining benefits that are only available through DSS. It is absolutely not the time for staffing cuts and an office closure.

I would like to address two specific provisions in H.B. 6846

TFA COLA freeze, section 9:

There were no cost of living adjustments in the Temporary Family Assistance program for over 20 years. While COLAs were recently reinstated, there remains a huge gap between the cost of basic housing and the TFA payments standard. A family of three in Hartford receives \$597 per month. According to HUD statistics, the fair market rent for a one family apartment in the Hartford area is \$918.

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The TFA payment clearly falls well short of that, never mind all the other household costs that it is meant to cover. I testified before this committee last week about important changes to the TFA program to allow recipients to train for better paying jobs. Ultimately, employment is the way out of poverty and I continue to urge your support for the changes in S.B 895.

Limiting HUSKY applications, section 3

When someone applies for medical coverage from AccessHealth CT or DSS, they are not likely to know which of the many DSS medical programs or subsidized insurance options they might qualify for. So the Affordable Care Act requires that **whatever** agency takes the application, either AccessHealth or DSS in Connecticut, the application should be accepted and eligibility should be timely determined without the need for the individual to apply a second time. While AccessHealth does not itself determine eligibility for certain Medicaid programs (programs that do not evaluate income according to modified federal tax or MAGI rules, primarily HUSKY C for the elderly/disabled and Medicare Savings Programs), it can and should automatically direct applications from those potentially eligible for these Medicaid programs to DSS for completion.

This section, though, includes a provision that says that AccessHealth can deny these applications and tell the often confused individuals to reapply, presumably, at DSS: "Persons who are determined ineligible for assistance pursuant to this section [concerning processing under MAGI rules] shall be provided a written statement notifying such persons of their ineligibility and advising such persons of their eligibility for one of the other insurance affordability programs as defined in 42 CFR 435.4." In addition to discouraging some people from pursuing essential benefits for which they are eligible, this would violate federal law. The ACA requires that there be "no wrong door" for those applying for health care. The no wrong door policy is particularly important in the present environment where there are **already** so many barriers to access to benefits administered by DSS. I urge the committee to oppose this change.